

INTRODUCTION: FOCUS ON NORTHERN IRELAND

There are two compelling reasons why this special issue of *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* should be concerned with Northern Ireland: its recent history (including numerous misconceptions about it) and current developments in connection with Brexit. As a matter of fact, there are dozens of reasons why Northern Ireland deserves attention both in Poland and elsewhere and yet with the accumulation of various centenaries in the Republic of Ireland it is easy to overlook a unique set of historical circumstances in the North at the moment. In 2018 twenty years passed since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, an informal name given to the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement reached in Belfast on April 10, 1998. As guest editors of the current issue we have taken this to be a perfect opportunity to invite a panoply of researchers from all over Europe (including France, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Poland) to explore various aspects of Northern Irish culture and society so that we could offer our readers, for the first time in a Polish journal, an overview of several social, literary, artistic, political and historical developments in a region whose identity constitutes, to an untrained eye, a considerable conundrum. For a place torn by conflict and populated by several ethnicities issues of identity and belonging are particularly sensitive: that is why lessons from Northern Ireland teach us so much about numerous other European societies as well. After all, conflicted identities in postnational states are a more and more common phenomenon these days.

And yet the sheer significance of the historical moment in Northern Ireland—twenty years into the peace process; on the eve of Brexit—does not sufficiently explain a heightened interest in ethnoreligious tensions and the peace process realities. As we are nearing the conclusion of the 2010s, Europe faces a variety of crises, including tribal conflicts often masked as ethnic nationalisms. Northern Irish culture and society may thus offer clues about symptoms, sources and solutions to those tensions, without necessarily implying that the Troubles have been successfully resolved. Reconciliation is still an ongoing project in Belfast and the environs.

Reconciliation, healing, parity of esteem—those are commonly used terms in Northern Ireland. To make sense of their larger context, it is necessary to either inhabit it or imagine what it is like to live in a place where your neighbours are (or used to be) enemies armed with AR-18 Armalite rifles or Browning pistols. Between

1969 and 1998 Northern Ireland witnessed an ethnic conflict whose roots go back to the 17th century and the Plantation of Ulster by the Protestant settlers from Scotland, England and Wales. The presence of a solid majority of Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglicans in the North at the beginning of the 20th century made it incumbent on Great Britain to protect their rights from the Catholics in the South. When the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 paved the way for the establishment of the Free Irish State, representatives (MPs) of six counties in the north of Ireland opted out and decided to remain part of the United Kingdom (the opt-out was formally carried out in December 1922 although the unilateral establishment of Northern Ireland by the UK—known as the Government of Ireland Act—took place already on May 3, 1921). That is how Northern Ireland was formed: by the decision of a Protestant majority, but with a vocal Catholic minority (around 35 per cent of the population at that time) consistently refusing to accept this decision for decades to come.

The tensions within Northern Irish society came to a head towards the end of the 1960s, first in the form of social and political protests, demonstrations and peace marches in 1968. Then, in 1969 violence erupted, and soon it was polarized along the ethnoreligious axis. For an outsider it may have looked like a religious conflict, what with the names of the communities involved in the strife, but the stakes of the Troubles were different and less metaphysical: Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland fought for territory, human rights, civil rights, social privileges and power. Once the ferris wheel of murder and retaliation was set in motion, the conflict became tribal in the first place.

Northern Ireland entered 21st century determined to leave the Troubles behind. Once the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, and provisions were made to safeguard the rights of both major communities as well as all the minorities, including the protection of minority languages (mostly Irish and Ulster-Scots), the peace process offered the inhabitants of the Province new social, political, economic and cultural opportunities. For the first time in the history of Northern Ireland an autonomous government, made up of representatives of both nationalists and unionists, was formed (based on the principle of consociationalism, that is the sharing of power in a state), even if subsequent elections resulted in the victory of more radical parties on both sides of the political spectrum (Sinn Féin and DUP, respectively). With the decommissioning of the arsenals of the paramilitary organizations and reform of the police force in Northern Ireland, it may seem that the wounds of the past have effectively started to heal in the collective memory of both the Catholics and the Protestants. Both communities now account for a little more than 80 per cent of the entire population. Almost 17 per cent of the adults declare no religion or refuse to answer questions about religious affiliations (2011 census results). Moreover, in sheer numbers, a precarious balance between Catholics and Protestants has already been reached: 41 per cent Catholics vs. less than 42 per cent other Christians according to the 2011 census. This is a significant comparison also because Protestants are not a homogenous community: it is an umbrella term for Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglicans, and those

three denominations are markedly different in many respects, including their culture, history, political attitudes, etc. The articles published in this issue seek to do justice to that variety and complexity.

Frank Ferguson's essay is emblematic of those qualities inasmuch as it pays heed to the cultural exuberance and multiethnicity of contemporary Northern Ireland. At the same time its sustained focus on Ulster-Scots tradition and continued influence of Northern Irish culture on Ireland at large, as well as on other cultures, constitutes a particularly valuable contribution to our perception of the Province. Michał Lachman's interpretation of Christina Reid's works, in turn, shows how an individual playwright and her themes, settings and characters may be determined by social, political and historical circumstances. In his discussion of Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s Lachman singles out, besides the obvious context of the Troubles, such issues as marginalisation, economic problems and the struggle for survival as relevant to Reid's drama. In Wesley Hutchinson's essay, the recent conflict in Northern Ireland is illuminated in and through photography, which Hutchinson discusses as a medium representative of social and cultural attitudes to violence and the past. In *The Northern Ireland Troubles: What Was There to Photograph?*, Hutchinson offers a telling juxtaposition of lateral and frontal approaches to violence: both require a grounding in the visual codes that paramilitaries evolved to communicate with their victims. A similar focus on the visual predominates in the contribution by Katarzyna Bazarnik, whose essay is primarily concerned with Northern Irish murals. Her reading of the murals in Belfast and in other towns of Northern Ireland stresses their social and cultural function as platforms for communication in a multi-ethnic society. Patrick Quigley, well known for his biographies of Count Casimir Markievicz and Countess Constance Markievicz as well as for his novel *Borderland*, contributes to this issue a case study of Captain Jack White, a unique Ulsterman in many respects. In tune with the conclusions of most of the essays gathered here, Captain White's career transcends the political, social and religious divisions that shaped Irish and British politics in the 20th century. And finally Leszek Drong, in his essay on fiction and restorative justice in Northern Ireland, argues that it is easier to do justice to the Troubles by way of cultural representations of redemption and reconciliation (i.e., indirectly) than to face an actual truth commission of the sort that South Africa established after the removal of apartheid.

All in all, the essays we have collected in this issue offer a preliminary exploration of a very complex territory, which continues to pose a challenge to researchers both within the Province and beyond it. As editors of this collection, we believe there is an added value in confronting ideas and conclusions drawn by those who look at Northern Ireland from various perspectives. That is why it gives us an enormous satisfaction to offer our readers contributions from Irish, Northern Irish and Polish researchers alike. In the long run, comparative studies combined with transcultural perspectives are likely to open our eyes to much more than exclusively Northern Irish predicaments and success stories.

Katarzyna Bazarnik and Leszek Drong



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